TASC Talk Feb 2019 – Engineer through the Looking Glass, part 1

When I was a young lad way back in the 60's I have memories of sitting in front of, what was then, an incredibly modern Radio Rentals black and white television set at around Christmas time watching a lecture broadcast by the BBC from the Royal Institute in London and given by Professor Eric Laithwaite. At the time he must have been in his early 40's, and to my young mind, appeared to be a magical wizard who had the ability to make things float effortlessly in mid-air; move incredibly heavy weights using only one hand and lots of other wizardly things which left me and many other children amazed. He had slick back "Brylcreamed" hair and had the air of someone who was eager to show "us kids" just how much fun could be had by playing with electricity, magnets and gyroscopes. He did more to encourage my growing interest in science than any other teacher before or since.

Professor Eric Robert Laithwaite was born in Atherton, Lancashire on the 14th June, 1921 and died on the 27th November, 1997. He was one of England's best known engineers and inventors during the 1960's and 70's. He gave many lectures, including those at the Royal Institute to young and old at Christmas and also throughout the year. His plain speaking and enthusiasm shone out like a beacon, and like the Pied Piper he bewitched us with his love of science and engineering. Of course at the time there was a lot of great stuff going on in the world of technology; Man had recently landed and walked on the Moon, colour TV was appearing in wealthier households, computers, of sorts, were becoming available to the masses, non-stick frying pans were a god send and medicine was able to repair all sorts of once fatal conditions. In 1967 Dr Christiaan Barnard performed the world's first human heart transplant, exciting times!

Though "us kids" loved Professor Laithwaite this was not the case with the scientific establishment of the day, unfortunately he asked too many difficult questions and advocated heretical ideas which cut to the core of scientific beliefs, and this was unforgivable!

In my February talk/video I took a look at the man and the child like wonder and enthusiasm he brought to his subject, his engineering innovations and his "fallen angel" status from the rest of the scientific community. Unfortunately there are few personalities today, except for maybe, David Attenborough, Brian Cox and a handful of others who have the same ability to communicate with enthusiasm and obvious love of their subject to both children and adults alike.

In Part 2, sometime next year I hope to discuss his legacy of being "The Father of the Maglev" and how this technology led to the radical reinvention of the train.